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ABSTRACT

A teacher's experiences in teaching French to mixed-ability fourth- and fifth-graders have contributed to the development of an instructional approach that meets the challenges of this age group. The method devotes two-thirds of instructional time to language and one-third to culture. All language activities are conducted in French, and cultural content is presented in English. Vocabulary is learned through games, with active participation earning students extra points. In planning games, attention is paid to providing a variety of competitive, collaborative, sitting, running, individual, partner, and group opportunities in each lesson. All activities incorporate speech. Creating games has been relatively easy, while developing activities to emphasize particular grammatical points is more difficult. Students record all new material in a graded notebook for reference, and oral tests using materials used in class are useful for evaluation. An effort is made to bridge the curriculum methods to those used in later grades. Cultural courses content has been most popular with parents and colleagues. Students systematically learn about significant events in French and medieval history from Roman Gaul to 1945, and all events are linked to American culture. Most is taught through stories with miming, team games, worksheets, and projects involving parents and other teachers following. (MSE)

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A "HANDS ON" ELEMENTARY FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM

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My Fourth and Fifth Grade French classes were observed last week by a mature student who had read one of my articles about elementary language and culture.(10) She was obviously expecting to be impressed. The first lesson ran like clockwork and I felt proud that it had most likely come up to expectation. Speaking entirely in French, I conducted a series of activities using games, manipulatives, collaboration and competition. I demonstrated the effectiveness of the concrete approach without a single hitch. But then there followed the Fifth Grade! I was trying to teach the oral usage of the verb "to be" through a new activity. The lesson was a catastrophe. I had designed a group activity combining adjectives and verb which involved acting. The students couldn't handle the volume of new skills required and the lesson deteriorated into a noisy free for all. My visiter, no longer impressed, suggested that if the students had sat in their desks, working on their own from individual sheets of paper, they would have learned more.

I have chosen to begin with this personal experience because it highlights many of the problems faced by the elementary language teacher on on a daily basis. As elementary teachers, we learn to teach through "hands on" methods because students are at the concrete stage of their development.(9) As linguists, we learn that there is much research reinforcing the effectiveness of an activity approach at all levels.(1)(5)(7) However, although better materials are appearing on the market, such as those available through the National Textbook Company,(3)(8) a true "hands on" approach still requires that we create an enormous volume of materials ourselves. In addition to endless creativity, we also require endless energy and

a flexible budget. In many schools, however, our problems do not end here. A great number of upper school language teachers remain unimpressed by the oral proficiency of the elementary students they inherit. "Have the students learned anything?" they ask. "We still have to start at Chapter 1 because they don't know any grammatical terms." Teachers in other disciplines walk past our rooms and see children using puppets. "Just playing again?" they mutter, as they proudly clutch their bundle of standardized test results. Beyond all this, we know that as the first teachers to present a foreign language, we bear a major responsibility in establishing the students' longterm commitment to language study.

As my six years of elementary language teaching have progressed, I have both agonized over, and worked through, all of these problems. I teach French for three, forty minute periods per week to mixed ability Fourth and Fifth Graders. After Fifth Grade, all students go on to traditional French and Latin studies in Sixth Grade. The remainder of this essay will describe the program which is my own personal solution to the challenges outlined above. It has been developed over the last five years.

The program has cost little financially, but a great deal in personal time. It teaches and evaluates oral proficiency. It provides "bridging" grammatical instruction in preparation for a more traditional grammar based upper school course. And lastly, it incorporates a weighty rationale for language study through the teaching of culture. My instructional time is spent two thirds on language and one third on culture. All language activities are conducted in French from the onset. Because of the breadth and depth

of the cultural studies, the cultural content is conducted in English. One of the weekly lessons is all language, the other two are divided equally between language and culture. A "hands on" approach is used throughout.

As a basis for language content, I adhere to the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF) list of suggested elementary vocabulary topics for its annual "Grand Concours". To each vocabulary section, I add ancillary phrases which I introduce in conjunction with the unit. As the year progresses, I move systematically from the simplest to the most complicated vocabulary group, using a variety of games and activities. For example, when I teach the fruits through a simple team game, students also learn "Who has...?" and the reply, "I have..." Each student has a picture of a fruit. When I ask "Who has the apple?", a student holds up the apple picture and replies, "I have the apple." All my games require an oral response from the student to gain maximum points. Holding up the apple picture receives one point, whereas saying "I have the apple," as well, gains two points. Adding the extra point for speaking has made a dramatic difference to the oral contributions in class.

In addition, to enable the children to use questions from the very beginning, I frequently reorganize a game in groups or partners, with students taking the teacher role. As the phrases are mastered, I interchange phrases from one game to another until eventually the children are able to identify the vocabulary they have studied regardless of what other language is surrounding it. By the middle of their first year of French, students start to volunteer free

comments in French by piecing together disparate pieces of language learning. That is to say, they begin to actually manipulate language for their own practical use.

I have used the above fruit game as an example primarily because it is simple, being easy to prepare, transport and describe. Much of my apparatus, however, is more cumbersome. I have a complete set of dressing up clothes for use in learning clothing and adjectives, crockery and utensils for cooking and eating vocabulary, fluffy animals for "er" verb commands, toys for transport, huge laminated drawings for rooms of the house, puppets for greetings and plays. I also have a large number of tapes of modern French music, acquired very cheaply from an English teacher in France. We both taped the radio and then exchanged the tapes. In addition to all these things, I do, of course, have the normal selection of photos and flash cards

When planning games, I pay attention to providing a variety of competitive, collaborative, sitting, running, individual, partner and group opportunities in each lesson. I do a minimum of five activities with the Fourth Grade, and three with the Fifth. All activities incorporate student speech. Initially, I present new vocabulary by pointing to the pictures or items. The students repeat each word or phrase. Next we move to an activity which requires students to say vocabulary already used by the teacher which tests their passive vocabulary. Later the game will require them to use the vocabulary actively. For example, in a running game where students have to compete with each other to reach a transport toy, I will say, "Where is the train?" The students will race to the train

and say, "Here is the train." The game will then be reworked with numbered cards being placed by each toy. I will then ask, "What is number 6?" The students race to the toy in question and say, "It is the (train)." In this instance, the student is required to say the transport vocabulary from memory.

Creating games to practice groups of words and a few phrases is of course relatively easy. Working out activities for emphasizing particular grammatical points requires more skill and tenacity. In my first few years of elementary language I used to resort to the blackboard when I wished to work specifically with verbs, adjectival agreement, the article, singular and plural, etc. I didn't believe activity methods would hold up to more complex language learning. I now know this to be untrue. What I also realize however, is that I am not going to invent perfect activities immediately. The initial floundering observed by my visiter is common. I am finding "hands on" solutions through trial, and lots of error. But certain simple successes are emerging. I teach the singular and plural article through TPR. "Touch the book!", obviously requires a different response from, "Touch the books!" The verb "to be" involves a six sided dice game. Each side of the dice has one part of the verb written on it. Adjectival agreement is taught through little mimes. Pronouns involve a mimed rap. The opportunities are in fact endless, even though one's energy may not be.

In order to provide proof to oneself, one's colleagues, to the parents, to the administration, and not least to the students themselves, that all this fun is about learning, it is important to furnish "proof" of a traditional nature. After the students have

mastered each new language section, they record all new material in a notebook kept especially for this purpose. The book serves as reference which transfers from year to year. Emphasis is placed upon layout and neatness, and a half point is lost for every copying error. It is useful to let administrators and parents see this record, so that they better appreciate the volume of language covered.

Oral tests, using the same pictures or materials used in class, are another way of reminding oneself, the students and the outside world that learning is truly taking place through fun. I have found also that good student scores in the national AATF "Grand Concours" have helped in communicating to parents how much their children are learning.

It is also important to consider upper school methodologies when planning an elementary curriculum. Almost certainly students will meet with a more grammar based approach in the upper grades. I use student questions as a spring board for what I think of as "bridging" teaching. Inevitably, sooner or later, students will ask why articles are not all the same, or why we always say "There are," instead of "There is," in a particular instance. I use these opportunities to insert a grammatical explanation. Students do not perceive these explanations as boring or irrelevant, since it is they who initiate the discussion. As the years progress, I note areas we have covered, and then towards the end of the year I add anything important not covered.

It is, however, not the language, but the cultural content of my program which has elicited the most excitement among parents and

colleagues. As an elementary teacher who had previously taught in community college, high and junior high school, I knew all too well the challenges of upper school language teaching. Most students have no sense of the global nature of the world, let alone of their own culture. They, quite simply, see no reason for learning a foreign language, other than that it is a requirement. Eventually, by the time most students have dropped foreign language, they may take university courses which tell them about the global nature of their own and other cultures. But it is too late. Students need to be taught both about the world and their own American global culture at the same time as they are being introduced to foreign language communication. That is to say, cultural explanation and justification should always accompany language studies.

It was with this fact in mind, that I incorporated very substantial amounts of culture into my Fourth and Fifth Grade curriculum. I had already designed and implemented a Grade 1-3 preparatory language sequence through which students learn about the global nature of the world, and especially about the development of their own language and culture. In the First Grade, students explore five non-Western cultures represented in the student body. In the second grade, they look at all the aspects of American society, including language, which can be traced back to the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks. Similarly, in third Grade, they are introduced to Latin and all that the United States has inherited from Ancient Rome. This program incorporates music, art, drama, crafts, cooking, games and sports. When planning the French curriculum, it was an obvious progression to continue connecting the students with the wider global

world while maintaining the multi-disciplinary approach.

Students in Grades Four and Five systematically learn about significant events in French and Medieval history from Roman Gaul to 1945. All events are tied with their own American world, thus steadily building up a knowledge about the global nature of their own culture. For example, the Macdonald's arch down the road follows a trend in arches begun by the Romans, evidenced in France, and now popular throughout the world. The religious wars in France lead to American immigration from France and the establishment of freedom of religion in the United States. Explorations in the reign of Louis XIV lead to the naming of Louisiana, to French-speaking Quebec and eventually to the Cajuns.

The vast majority of the culture is taught through stories which are then mimed. Following this, information is revised in a team game, followed by a work sheet. The written record is again important. Firstly, it provides proof of the volume and depth of material covered and tests student retention of important facts. It also provides students with a written record of names which frequently sound very different in spoken language. Furthermore, it affords a further opportunity to emphasize the connecting links which are an essential component in relating the students to a wider global world. Not incidentally, by concentrating mainly on historical and geographical aspects of French culture at the elementary level, the upper school teachers are able to maintain the enthusiasm of their students by starting on the totally new material of modern French culture.

In addition to the stories, followed by acting, a revision game

and a work sheet, students also do projects which involve parents and other teachers. An architecture unit uses parents to ferry students around the many Gothic buildings which Pittsburgh continues to style after medieval Europe. The Italian Wars and Renaissance unit requires the librarian to select materials. The Napoleonic unit ties in with the Fifth Grade studies on the Louisiana purchase. All these projects maintain the activity oriented approach used in language. Art, music, slides, overheads, films and videos are also incorporated.

To date, the language profession has not identified a single correct way to teach language.(2) Clearly, the program I have described above is simply my personal solution to the several problems I face daily as an elementary language teacher. Significantly, however, the failure to meet these challenges has been identified as a contributory cause for the demise of elementary foreign language in the fifties and sixties.(6) After two years of 120 minutes of French per week, my students are enthusiastic, speak simple French without inhibition, and feel related to the French language and culture. I judge this to be a success. I believe, however, that the program significantly owes this success to the multi-disciplinary, activity-oriented methodology which allows children to learn while having fun. Research by the Socony Vacuum Oil Company tells us that students learn 90% of the material when totally involved in the learning process, as against 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear and 30% of what they see.(4) I am always encouraged to read such research since it supports a methodology

which I have observed to be the most successful over a period of twenty years of class room teaching. Significantly, this approach is in line with a far wider trend which aims to improve all aspects of education through increasing student involvement in the learning process.

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